

Conscientious Projectors--and Others

By THOMAS L. MASHON.

THE business of manufacturing heroes and heroines in books by an alternate process of analysis and description, which was started by Samuel Richardson some two hundred years ago, is beginning to assume alarming proportions. At the present rate of production in a few more decades there will be more characters in novels than there are people outside of them. It is a mighty poor novel that doesn't have at least half a dozen characters and the number and productive capacity of novelists are constantly increasing. Without descending too far into prophecy or tedious statistics it seems probable indeed that in a short time there will be nobody on earth left but short story writers, playwrights and novelists. Possibly this is a wise provision of nature to get rid of them all. They will be forced in time to read one another's works, and thus be killed off by a process of premature exhaustion. Meantime we must face the facts: the creation of characters is going on without any apparent let up, the main difficulty being that they retire from active life almost as soon as they are created. They are all there, however, thousands of them, all imprisoned in books that are no longer read; and it is to the pathetic condition of these unfortunates that I desire to call attention.

Consider how dreadful is the fate of some of these characters in novels who have "vibrant" voices, who are reeking with all kinds of emotions, who pace the floor, blush ever and anon to the roots of their hair, who throw themselves on neat beds in passions of tears and who, even in their moments of apparent tranquillity, are constantly engaged in "flicking" the ashes from cigarettes. Ben King once wrote some verses the burden of which was that there "is nowhere to go but out." But even this liberty is denied to our characters; they must eat out their hearts penned between covers, with nobody to associate with but themselves! Is it right thus to create them and leave them to linger eternally on old bookshelves in libraries? Pickwick and Hamlet still have their freedom. Pere Goriot, Tom Jones, Mrs. Malaprop and a host of others are more real to us than reality, because they are much more stable. In contrast with these immortals it would be too cruel to name the names of those who have—so far as the public is concerned—passed away within the last year. What is really the matter with them? Were they too hastily manufactured? Did their creators lose interest in them too soon? And if at least nothing can be done to bring them back to life, is it possible for us to invent a new process of creation whereby characters in novels will be entitled to what the Constitution (however ingeniously!) assures to each one of us—life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?

II.

The mere finding of names for them is a painful affair. Dickens did it by studying the street signs. Many authors pore constantly over city directories. Mr. Galsworthy, for example, has been hard put to it recently because he has written so many books. Probably his last book, "To Let," and some others are about the various branches of one family because he couldn't find enough names to go round. Thus, under the broad title of Forsyte, he is able to introduce any number of characters, Fleur, Jon, Soames, June and so on, all Forsytes. And certainly a few modern authors know how to create any better than Mr. Galsworthy. He makes one feel not only that he knows how to write but that he cares how he writes; and he seems to spare no pains in painting his people. The consciousness that he is a skilled workman comes home to the reader at once. So with Mr. Bennett, so with Mr. Ervine and so with our own Booth Tarkington. We might easily term all of these noble workers in creation conscientious projectors and do them no more than justice. If their characters do not live it is no fault of theirs. How different is Joseph Conrad's method! It would almost seem as if, perhaps before the book is started, he enters into an agreement with all of his characters that they will help him create one another. He actually lets them do a considerable share of the work—wise man! But after all, it is just as much conscientious projection as with the others. And Henry

James has explained it very well, probably taking Tourgeniev as a model. A character is thus born into the mind of the creator. First there is a germ, a norm, a faint, nebulous affair that floats about much like the disembodied spirits of a medium. Materialization is very gradual. One must wait for the character to assume shape, to acquire personality. If it is true, as stated, that Shakespeare wrote his "Merry Wives" for Queen Elizabeth in two weeks, then he must have had somewhere inside of him a capacity for speeding up. It is no reflection upon Henry James to say that Shakespeare does it so much better; the real wonder is that not only does he do it better but so much quicker and easier. The fact is, however, that true genius is not only unerring but capable of incredible bursts of speed; and most of the great geniuses have been prolific.

III.

Among all the works of fiction being published, those of us who care to do so may come to know the conscientious projectors, in contrast to the majority who write, well, let us say, for money alone. We can tell that they really care by innumerable signs. Still, is it fair to accuse the majority of bad work just because they work for money? Shakespeare worked for money. Johnston wrote "Rasselas" to pay his mother's funeral expenses. Both Mr. Arnold Bennett and Bernard Shaw, and other first rank writers, are keen business men. The fact is, that the word commercialism has crept into our criticism of literature owing to our lamentable habit of loose definition. If we wish to condemn, no matter whether the object be a novelist, an artist, an editor or a lady trying to secure a divorce, we say they are actuated by commercialism. We are all commercial, in the sense that our maintenance is perhaps too likely to be a matter for continuous anxiety. Indeed, without this incentive, it is doubtful if half of the world's masterpieces would have been produced.

Furthermore, it is not, or may not be, slipshod workmanship that is the cause of all those characters being imprisoned in books. Walter Scott practically admitted that he was a slipshod workman. "I am no grammarian," he said. The particular thing in any man that makes him permanently interesting to other men, seems to ride over all rules. We must hasten to say, however, that we are attempting no defense of slipshod work. There is no defense of it. Most of the big people take infinite pains; they are work incarnate.

Why is it then, that all these characters are being created, multiplying so ceaselessly in the interminable pages of books forgotten so shortly after they are issued, and all to no purpose? Surely in this world of ours there are enough dull people, without the additional trouble of creating them artificially!

IV.

The reason, although, so far as I am aware as yet unexplained, appears to me to be a simple one. Yet before giving it I should like to add a word about the methods of these writers, the ones whose works die so soon, and who may be termed unconscientious projectors. A few of them are enormously successful—shall I say commercially? That is, they make heaps of money. And even their imitators make money, so great is the ephemeral demand for books whose characters cannot live more than a few months, doomed then to dwell forever in darkness. Among so many of them, it would be wrong to name even one, to single him out as a horrid example, especially when he himself may not be to blame. And what are these people, the makers and attempters of best sellers, actually doing? Most of them are like some motor car manufacturers who deal only in assembled parts. They know their work is good, because they have taken only the best parts made by other manufacturers. Could anything be simpler? We see the principle at work in the movies perhaps better than anywhere else, because we can actually see it, but it is the same principle that works in best sellers. Sentiment is not only obvious, but universal; therefore sentiment must rule. There is sentiment to a child playing with a litter of puppies; and therefore a child playing with puppies must be introduced at regular intervals, just as they show us women making baby clothes and unnumbered heroes sheltering unnumbered heroines from snowstorms in the great Northwest, in

abandoned camps. This is not to condemn the portrayal of sentiment or to say that it has not a right to take on new forms and to have those forms duplicated. Nothing should be utterly condemned. There is more good in any one thing than any critic will admit.

And now for the reason why, which I have stated was so simple, and which really is simple. It is due entirely to the demand. The majority of readers prefer the adulterated to the genuine. They prefer characters with short lives and merry ones, manufactured by a process that causes them no effort, to characters created by artists, that have to be met half way. All of our emotions are becoming standardized; we demand standardized characters. We surround ourselves materially with manufactured products. Why not mentally? Mr. David Houston, former Secretary of the Treasury, has expressed the same idea in another way when he says that our people are responsible for increasing expenditures, and not Government officials. "They are," he continues, "responsible both affirmatively and negatively, by aggression and neglect."

And similarly, by aggression and neglect, are they responsible for the increasing number of artificial characters in novels. These characters are created and neglected, not so much by the authors as by the readers.

William Bowen has placed the stage and movie rights of his book "The Old Tobacco Shop." He is at work on the dramatization and plans are being made for 1923 production. Mr. Bowen has been visiting Washington, Baltimore and New York on legal business. He returned to Los Angeles last week.

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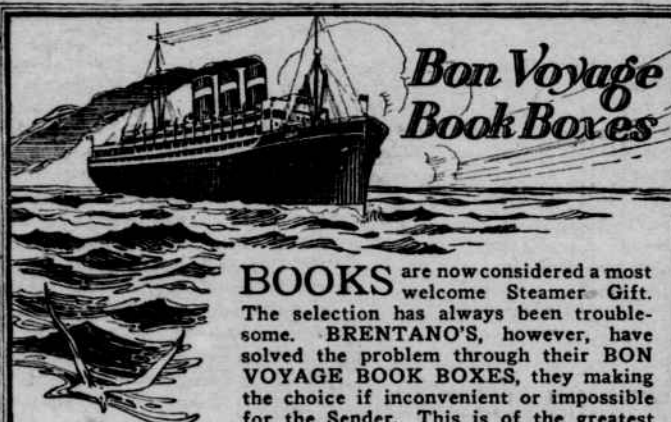
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